

The Destroying Angel

By Louis Joseph Vance

Author of

"The Pool of Flame,"
"The Bronze Bell," "The Black Bag," "The Brass Bowl."

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SYNOPSIS.

CHAPTER I—Told by three doctors that he has but six months to live, Hugh Whitaker returns to his club to find that his affianced has left him. His friend Peter Stark persuades him to plan a South Sea cruise.

CHAPTER II—Whitaker runs away from Peter and registers in an obscure hotel as Hugh Morton. He is shown by mistake to the room of Mary Ladislas, who has run away with and been deserted by a chauffeur named Morton. Whitaker prevents Mary's suicide.

CHAPTER III—Whitaker marries the girl, provides for her financial future and sends her back to New York. Peter finds him at the railway station.

CHAPTER IV—Peter and Whitaker go to the South Sea where Whitaker recovers from his malady. The yacht, with Peter and all hands, is lost at sea while Whitaker, who is supposed to have gone down with the vessel, is ashore. He becomes wealthy under the name of Morton and six years later goes home to New York and meets his former partner, Drummond, who is engaged to be married to a celebrated actress, Sara Lee, and also meets Max, Sara's theatrical manager.

CHAPTER V—At the theater Whitaker discovers in Sara Lee the Mary Ladislas whom he married six years before.

CHAPTER VI—While Whitaker is trying to get an interview with his wife he hears of Drummond's suicide.

CHAPTER VII—Martin Ember, retired detective, calls on Whitaker and tells him Sara Lee's strange history. She is called "The Destroying Angel," because before Drummond's suicide three men had loved her, and one by one they died. Ember thinks Drummond still alive.

CHAPTER VIII—Whitaker's wife by letter proposes divorce. Drummond's accounts show that he has stolen the estate left for Mary's use by Whitaker when he left New York. An attempt by an unknown to murder Whitaker is made.

[Cont. next]

Leading arms the better to guide his guest, Ember drew him toward the lights.

"Bungalow," he explained, sententious, flourishing his free hand; "hormitage—retreat."

"Paradise," Whitaker summed up, in the same manner. "No neighbors?"

"Oh"—Ember motioned to his left as they faced the water—"there's a married establishment over there somewhere, but we don't bother one another. Fellow by the name of Fiske. I understand the place is shut up—Fiske not coming down this year."

"So much the better. I've been waiting just this all summer, without realizing it."

"Welcome, then, to Half-a-Loaf lodge."

They entered a long and deep living room with walls of peeled logs and, at one end, a stone fireplace where a wood fire blazed heartily. At a comfortable distance from the hearth stood a table bright with linen, silver and crystal—covers for two. The rear wall was broken by three doors, in one of which a rotund Chinaman beamed oleagiously. Ember hailed him by the title of Sum Fat, explaining that it wasn't his name, but claiming for it the virtue of exquisite felicity.

"My servant in town, here man-of-all-work; I've had him for years; faithful and indispensable."

Toward the end of an excellent dinner, Whitaker caught himself nodding and blinking with drowsiness. Ember took laughing compassion upon him and led him forthwith to a bedroom furnished with the rigid simplicity of a summer camp. Then he slept round the clock. The shrill, imperative rattle of a telephone bell roused him. As he dressed he could hear the voice of Ember in the living room talking over the telephone. Presently there came a tap at his door, and his host entered.

"Up, eh?" he said cheerfully. "I was afraid I'd have to wake you." His smile vanished beneath the clouds of an impatient frown. "This is the devil of a note; I've got to leave you."

"What's the trouble?"

"That's what I'm called upon to find out. A friend of mine's in a tight place, and I've got to go and help him through. He just called me up—and I can't refuse. D'you mind being left alone for a day or so?"

"Certainly not—only I'm sorry."

"No more than I. But I'll try to get back tomorrow. If I don't, the next day—or as soon as I possibly can. Meanwhile, please consider yourself lord and master here. Sum Fat will take good care of you. Anything you want, just ask him. Now I've got to get into waterproofs—it's raining like all get-out, but I can't wait for a let-up."

By the time Whitaker was ready for breakfast his host had splashed off to his motor car.

The wind, freshening and driving very respectable if miniature rollers against the bench, came in heavy gusts, alternating with periods of steady, strong blowing. At times the shining lances of the rain seemed to drive almost horizontally. Whitaker poked his head into the kitchen. In that immaculate place, from which every hint of breakfast had disappeared as if by magic, Sum Fat was religiously cleaning his teeth—for the third time that morning, to Whitaker's certain knowledge.

When he had finished, Whitaker put a question:

"Sum Fat, which way does the wind blow, do you know?"

Sum Fat flashed him a dazzling smile.

"Eastly," he said in a cheerful, clucking voice. "I think vely fine three-day blow."

"At least," said Whitaker, "you're a high-spirited prophet of evil. I thank you."

He selected a book from several shelves stocked with a discriminating taste, and settled himself before the fire.

The day wore out before his patience did, and with every indication of fulfilling the prognosis of Sum Fat; by nightfall the wind had developed into an enthusiastic gale, driving before it sheeted rain and great ragged wastes of mist.

And the second day was like unto the first. The third day broke full of the spirit of the second; but toward noon the rain ceased. In the evening, weary of the sedulous attentions of a cloud of famished mosquitoes, Whitaker sat in darkness, not tired enough to go to bed, too tired to bestir himself and seek distraction from a tormenting train of thought.

A pool of limpid moonlight lay like milk upon the floor beneath a window and held his dreaming gaze while memory marshaled for his delectation a pageant of wasted years, infinitely desolate and dreary in his vision.

How long he sat unstriving, preoccupied with fruitless inquiry, he did not guess. But later he reckoned it could not have been long after ten o'clock when he was disturbed. The sound of a footfall, hushed and stealthy on the veranda, roused him with a start, and almost at the same instant he became aware of a shadow that troubled the pool of moonlight, the foreshortened shadow of a man's head and shoulders. He sat up, tense, rigid with surprise.



He Sat Up Tense, Rigid With Surprise.

and wonder, and stared at the silhouetted body at pause just outside the window. The fellow was stooping to peer in. Had Drummond hunted him down to this isolate hiding place? On the thought he leaped up, in two strides slammed out through the door.

"I say!" he cried loudly. But he cried, apparently, to empty air. The man was gone—vanished as strangely and as quietly as he had appeared.

Pausing and glaring round the clearing in complete bewilderment, he detected or else fancied a slight movement in the shadows on the edge of the encompassing woodland. Instantly, heedless of the risk he ran if the man were indeed Drummond and if Drummond were indeed guilty of the assault now four nights old, Whitaker broke for the spot. It proved to be the entrance to one of the woodland paths, and naturally—whether or no his imagination were in fault—there was no body waiting there to be caught.

But if anyone had been there, he had unquestionably fled along the trail. Whitaker in a rage set himself to follow. Before he realized he could have covered half the distance, he emerged abruptly into the clearing of the Fiske place.

Here he pulled up, for the first time alive to the intrinsic idiosyncrasy of his conduct, and diverted besides by the discovery that his impression of the early evening, that the cottage was tenanted, had been well founded.

The ground floor windows shone with a dim but warm illumination. He could see distinctly part of a living room rather charmingly furnished in a summery way. At its farther end a dark-haired woman in a plain black dress with a short apron and lace cap sat reading by lamplight—evidently a maid. Her mistress—judging by appearances—was outside on the lawn below the veranda, strolling to and fro in company with a somewhat short and heavy man who wore an automobile duster and visored cap. By contrast, her white-clad figure, invested with the illusion of moonlight, seemed unusually tall. Her hair was fair, shining like a headress of palest gold as she bent her head, attentive to her companion. And Whitaker thought to discern an unusual quality in her movements, a quality of charm and a graciousness of mien rarely to be noticed even in the most beautiful of the women he had known.

Of a sudden the man paused, produced a watch from beneath his duster, consulted it briefly and shut the case with a snap. He said something

in a brusque tone, and was answered by what sounded like a pleasant negative. Promptly, as if annoyed, he turned and strode hastily away, disappearing round the house.

Alone, the woman watched him as long as he was in sight, her head to one side with an effect of critical amusement. Then, with a low laugh, she crossed the veranda and entered the lighted room. At the same time Whitaker, lingering and watching without in the least understanding or even questioning why he was doing this thing so contrary to his instincts, heard the heavy rumble of a motor car on the far side of the house and saw the machine swing off across the clearing into the woods.

In the living room the woman was saying: "You may go now, Elise. I'll be ready for bed before long."

"Yes, madam." The maid rose and moved briskly out of sight.

Her mistress, casting aside a scarf of embroidered Chinese brocade, stood for a moment in deep thought, her head bowed, the knuckle of a slender forefinger tapping her chin—characteristically posed. Whitaker abruptly understood why it was he loitered, peeping—she was absolutely beautiful, a creature both exquisite and superb, a matchless portrait for the galleries of his memory.

Something—a movement or perhaps a slight sound—had drawn his attention from the woman. He saw the other man standing boldly in full moonlight, all his attention concentrated on the brilliant picture framed by the window. He was unquestionably without knowledge of the nearness of the other—of Whitaker in the shadows. And though his back was to the moon and his face further shadowed by a peaked cap, Whitaker was absolutely sure of the man—he was certainly Drummond.

Without pause for thought, he sprang toward him, in a guarded voice uttering his name—"Drummond!" But the fellow proved too alert and quick for him. Whitaker's hands closed on nothing more substantial than thin air; at the same time he received a blow upon his bruised shoulder smart and forcible enough to stagger him and evoke an involuntary grunt of pain. And before he could regain his balance the fellow was thrashing noisily away through the woodland underbrush.

Fortwith he struck off and blundered senselessly through the forest, misled by his elusive phantasmagoria, until, realizing at length he did but duplicate an earlier folly, he gave up the chase in disgust and slowly made his way back to the bungalow.

CHAPTER X.

The Spy.

Already the sun was warm, the faint breeze bland. Standing at the window and shading his eyes against the glare, Whitaker surveyed a world new-washed and radiant; the landlocked bay dimpled with vagrant catpaws and smitten with sunlight as with a scimitar of fire; the earth fresh and fragrant, steaming faintly in the ardent glow of the dawn.

In another moment he was at the kitchen door, interrupting Sum Fat's first matutinal attentions to his teeth with a demand for a bathing suit. Three minutes later, from the end of the small dock, he dived neatly, coming to the surface with his flesh tingling with delight of the cool water; then, with the deliberate and powerful movements of an experienced swimmer, struck away from the land. Two hundred yards out he paused, rolled over on his back, and hands clasped beneath his head, floated serenely, sunlight warming his upturned face, his body rejoicing in the suave, clean, fluid embrace.

Then something disturbed him—a dull fluttering, vibrant upon his submerged eardrums. Extending his arms and moving his hands gently to preserve his poise, he lifted his head from the water. From the landing stage on the Fiske place a motor boat was standing out. The churning of its propeller had aroused him. He could see but a single person for all its crew. Seated astern, dividing her attention between the side steering wheel and the engine, she was altogether ignorant of the onlooker. Only her head and shoulders showed above the coming—her head with its shining crown, her shoulders cloaked with a light wrap gathered at the throat.

Whitaker, admiring, wondered... Sweeping in a wide arc as it gathered speed, the boat presently shot out smartly on a straight course for the barrier beach.

Why? What business had she there? And at an hour so early?

No affair of his—Whitaker admitted as much freely. And yet he was beginning his fourth day on the Great West Bay without having set foot upon its Great South beach! Ridiculous oversight! And one to be remedied without another hour's delay.

Grimacing with amused toleration of his own perverse sophistry, he turned over on his side and struck out in the wake of the motor boat. When at length he waded ashore he found the motor boat moored in shallow water at the end of a long and substantial dock. He patted the flanks of the vessel as he waded on.

"Good little boat!" said he.

Walking rapidly, very soon he stood at the head of a rude flight of wooden steps which ran down from the top of a wave-eaten sand bluff, some ten or twelve feet in height, to the broad and gently shelving ocean beach. Midway between the sand bluff and the breaking waters stood the woman Whitaker had followed. (There wasn't any use mincing terms—he had followed her in his confounded, fatuous curiosity!) Her face was to the sea, her hands clasped behind her. Now the wind

modeled her cloak sweetly to her body, now whipped its skirts away, disclosing legs straight and slender and graciously modeled. She was dressed, it seemed, for bathing.

Whitaker turned to go, and turning let his gaze sweep up from the beach and along the brow of the bluff. He paused, frowning. Some twenty feet or so distant the legs of a man, trousered and booted, protruded from a hollow between two hummocks of sand. And the toes of the boots were digging into the sand, indicating that the man was lying prone; and that meant (if he were neither dead nor sleeping) that he was watching the woman on the beach.

Indignation, righteous indignation, warmed Whitaker's bosom. It was all very well for him to catch sight of the woman through her cottage window, by night, and to swim over to the beach in her wake the next morning, but what right had anybody else to constitute himself her shadow? Besides, it was possible that the man was Drummond.

He strode forward and stood over the man, looking down at his back. It was true, as he had assumed—the fellow was watching the woman. And his back was very like Drummond's. A little quiver of excitement mingled with anticipative satisfaction ran through him. Now, at last, the mystery was to be cleared up, his future relations with the pseudo-suicide defined and established.

Deliberately he extended his bare foot and nudged the man's ribs.

"Drummond..." he said in a clear voice, decided but unaggressive. With an oath and what seemed a single, quick motion, the man jumped to his feet and turned to Whitaker a startled and inflamed countenance.

"What the devil!" he cried angrily. "Who are you? What do you want? What d'you mean by coming round here and calling me Drummond?"

He was no more Drummond than he was Whitaker himself.

"For that matter"—something clicked in Whitaker's brain and subconsciously he knew that his temper was about to take the bridge—"what do you mean by spying on that lady yonder?"

It being indisputably none of his concern, the unfairness of the question only lent it offensive force. The man made this painfully clear through the medium of an intolerable epithet and an attempt to land his right fist on Whitaker's face.

The face, however, was elsewhere when the fist reached the point for which it had been aimed; and Whitaker closed in promptly as the fellow's body followed his arm, thrown off balance by the momentum of the unobstructed blow.

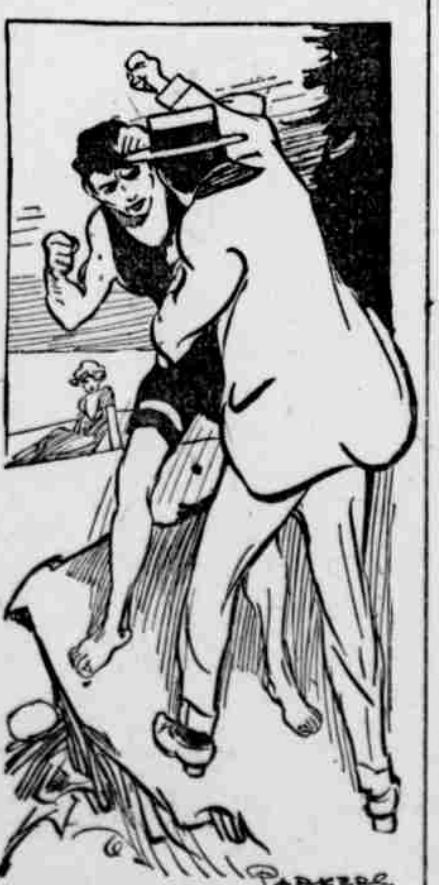
What followed had entered into the calculations of neither. Whitaker felt himself suddenly falling through air thick with a blinding, choking cloud of dust and sand. The body of the other was simultaneously wrenched violently from his grasp. Then he brought up against solidity with a bump that seemed to expel every cubic inch of air from his lungs. And he heard himself cry out sharply with the pain of his weak ankle newly twisted.

He sat up, gasping for breath, brushed the sand from his face and eyes, and as soon as his whirling wits settled a little, comprehended what had happened.

Half buried in the debris of a miniature landslide, he sat at the foot of the bluff. Immediately above his head a ragged break showed where the sand, held together solely by beach grass, had given way beneath the weight of the antagonists.

A little distance from him the other man was picking himself up, apparently unhurt but completely surfeited. Without delay, with not even so much as a glance at Whitaker, he staggered off for a few paces, then settled into a heavy, lumbering trot westward along the beach. He did not wish the woman to recognize him; therefore he was putting himself out of her way. For she was approaching.

When Whitaker caught sight of her she was already close at hand. She



Whitaker Closed in Promptly.

had been running. Now as their glances met, hers keenly inquiring of Whitaker's still bewildered eyes, she pulled up abruptly and stood astare. He saw, or fancied, something closely akin to fright and consternation in her look. The flush in her cheeks gave

way to a swift pallor. The hands trembled that drew her beach cloak close about her. She seemed to make an ineffectual effort to speak.

On his part, Whitaker tried to get up. A keen twinge in his ankle, however, vying an involuntary grunt from him, and with a wry grimace he sank back.

"Oh!" cried the woman, impulsively. "You're hurt!" She advanced a pace, solicitous and sympathetic.

"Oh, not much," Whitaker replied in a tone more of hope than of assurance. He felt tenderly of the injured member. "Only my ankle—twisted it a few days ago, and now again. It'll be all right in a moment or two."

Her gaze traveled from him to the edge of the bluff.

"I didn't see—I mean, I heard something, and turned, and saw you trying to sit up and the other man rising."

"Sorry we startled you," Whitaker mumbled, wondering how the deuce he was going to get home. His examination of the ankle hadn't proved greatly encouraging.

"But I—ah—how did it happen?"

"A mere misunderstanding," he said lightly. "I mistook the gentleman for someone I knew. He resented it, so we started to scrap like a couple of schoolboys. Then... I wish to heaven it had been his leg instead of mine!"

"But still I hardly understand..."

"Well, you see, I—ah—I'm visiting Ember—the cottage next to yours, I believe. That is, if I'm not mistaken, you have the Fiske place?"

She nodded.

"And so, this morning, it struck me as a fine young idea to swim over here and have a look at the beach. And then I found that chap watching you—"

That startled her. "How do you mean—watching me?"

"Why—ah—that's what he seemed to be doing."

She shook her head. "You must be mistaken."

"Daresay. I generally am when I jump at conclusions. Anyway, he didn't like it much when I called him out of his name. I gathered, in fact, that he was considerably put out. Silly, wasn't it?"

"Rather!" she agreed gravely.

For a moment or two they eyed one another in silence, Whitaker wondering just how much of a fool she was thinking him and dubiously considering various expedients to ingratiate himself.

"I don't seem to think of anything useful to say," he ventured. "Can you help me out? Unless you'd be interested to know my name's Whitaker—Hugh Whitaker?"

She acknowledged the information merely by a brief nod. "It seems to me," she said seriously, "that the pressing question is, what are you going to do about that ankle? Shall you be able to walk?"

"Hard to say," he grumbled, a trifle dashed. With infinite pains and the aid of both hands and his sound foot, he lifted himself and contrived to stand erect for an instant, then bore a little weight on the hurt ankle—and blanched, palling visibly beneath his ineradicable tan.

"I don't suppose," he said with effort—"they grow—crutches—on this neck of land?"

And he was about to collapse again upon the sands when, without warning, he found the woman had moved to his side and caught his hand, almost brusquely passing his arm across her shoulders, so that she received no little of his weight.

"Oh, I say—" he protested feebly.

"Don't say anything," she replied shortly. "I'm very strong—quite able to help you to the boat. Please don't consider me at all; just see if we can't manage this way."

He endeavored to withdraw his arm, an effort rendered futile by her cool, firm grasp on his fingers.

"Please!" she said—not altogether patiently.

(To Be Continued)

Harsh physics react, weaken the bowels, will lead to chronic constipation. Doan's Regulax operate easily. 25c. a box at all stores.—adv.

Mr. Wilson during the past few days has become such a life long opponent of the pork barrel that he is almost sorry now he didn't veto some of those bills.

Secretary McAdoo warns Treasury employees against too much political activity, and if they don't disobey the order they are likely to be bounced.

A HEARTLESS ADMINISTRATION

This administration has displayed no more feeling of responsibility for the American women who have been raped and for the American men, women and children who have been killed in Mexico than a farmer shows for the rats killed by his dogs when the hay is taken from a barn. And now the American people are asked to sanction this policy in the name of peace, righteousness and humanity!—From the Speech of Colonel Theodore Roosevelt, delivered at Lewiston, Me., in behalf of Charles E. Hughes.

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ELECTING A PRESIDENT

15



McKinley Defeats Bryan in Election of 1896.

FREE silver was the issue in 1896. William Jennings Bryan was nominated by the Democrats, while William McKinley of Ohio was nominated by the Republicans. While the popular vote was close, McKinley received 271 votes in the electoral college to Bryan's 176. Garret A. Hobart was elected vice president. Other political parties had sprung up by this time, including the Prohibitionists and Socialists.

McKinley was again elected in 1900, defeating Bryan by a vote practically the same as that of 1896. Theodore Roosevelt of New York was elected vice president. McKinley was assassinated about six months after his second inauguration, and Roosevelt served three and one-half years of his second term.

(Watch for the election of Roosevelt in 1904 in our next issue.)

How Windows Can Be Frosted by the Householder.

Make a clear solution of gum arabic, dissolve enough epsom salts to make a strong solution and add to the gum arabic. Apply this mixture to the glass with a small brush.

LOOK OUT FOR THE CAR!

DO YOU know of anyone who is old enough to read, who has not seen that sign at a railroad crossing?

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